



For immediate release

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THIS LABOR DAY, AMERICANS NEED TO ASK: WHAT'S THE ECONOMY FOR, ANYWAY?

With Labor Day fast approaching, and forty percent of America's workers getting no vacation this year, leaders of the Seattle-based Take Back Your Time campaign (www.timeday.org) say America's political representatives need to be asked a question that most of them have been running from, namely, "What's the economy for, anyway?"

"Sure, we've got the most Gross Domestic Product in the world," says National Coordinator John de Graaf. "But there's no time to enjoy all that stuff and we're sacrificing so much. Americans can hardly find time to sit down to eat together anymore. Is our economy just for raising the Dow Jones average, or is it to provide healthy and happy kids, families and communities?"

"Consider the facts," adds Program Director Gretchen Burger. "Nearly half of all Americans will reach Labor Day without even a week off this summer. We're the only industrial country without mandated paid time off for vacation, and even workers who get paid leave are giving a lot of it back because of excessive job demands or a fear their job could be in jeopardy if they take it. That's not healthy—for our bodies, our families or our communities—and the situation is getting worse, not better."

Take Back Your Time points out that since the mid-1970s, American workers have been putting in longer hours and have also seen real wages stagnate despite a near-doubling of GDP. Compared to other wealthy countries, Americans are working longer, the gap between rich and poor in the US has become the widest in the modern industrial world, and we are at the bottom of the totem pole in terms of health outcomes.

"We're dead last," says board member Cecile Andrews, author of the forthcoming book, *Slow Is Beautiful: New Visions of Community, Leisure, and Joie de Vivre*. "We have the shortest life spans, the highest child mortality and the most chronic illness, in spite of spending way more than anyone else on health care. Studies show we've got twice as many things as we used to but we're no happier, just more stressed out."

A recent National Institutes of Health study showed that Americans were much less healthy than residents of the United Kingdom and twice as likely to suffer from chronic diseases. Several analysts pointed out that job stress and long working hours seem to be the prime culprits; they leave Americans with less time for exercise and for relationships with family and friends, two of the most significant predictors of good health.

Take Back Your Time urges that issues like paid family leave, sick leave and vacations be made priority subjects in this year's Congressional elections, to begin improving our health and the quality of American workers' lives. "Labor Day is the time to start that dialogue," argues de Graaf.

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Take Back Your Time is joining with such groups as MomsRising.org to put family-friendly policies on the political table. “We can be healthier, happier and even more productive per hour of work,” de Graaf adds. “And the World Economic Forum finds that four of the five most competitive economies in the world have the most time-friendly, family-friendly and worker-friendly policies. It’s a win-win situation.”

But it’s not just policies. The group suggests that personal and cultural change is needed as well.

“Let’s get back to the table,” says Andrews, echoing the theme for this year’s Take Back Your Time Day, which will be celebrated in many communities on October 24th. “We need to get back to the dinner table as families, to the card table as friends, to the pool table and ping pong table for recreation. We’re putting all our time into either work or electronic media and our health and relationships are suffering as a result.”

Since the 1970s, family life has also suffered, points out board member, William Doherty, a professor of family studies at the University of Minnesota. In addition to overwork, we’ve over-scheduled ourselves and our children. “About a third fewer families regularly eat dinner together now and a third fewer take family vacations” says Doherty. Doherty points out that shared family meals do more than help us bond; they’re the leading predictor of how well students do in school.

Cathy O’Keefe, professor of therapeutic recreation at the University of South Alabama and mother of five, notes that she and her husband adopted this Hodding Carter quote as their parenting motto: *There are only two lasting gifts that we can give our children: one is roots and the other wings.* “Those roots require time for building family relationships. Making memories—especially through recreation and sharing meals together—builds lasting positive emotions about family life. What could be better for our children?”

“Take Back Your Time is really about asking the big questions,” says Burger. “Like ‘what’s really important in life?’ and ‘what’s economy for, anyway?’ If it’s not about being healthier and happier, then what are we doing this for? Having the biggest GDP is not enough.” It’s something to contemplate at the beach this Labor Day. Or sadly, maybe even in the office since many of us won’t even get that day off.

TAKE BACK YOUR TIME (www.timeday.org) has a team of experts available to answer all media questions about these issues. Contact John de Graaf at 206-443-6747, or Gretchen Burger at 206-293-3772.

Take Back Your Time is an initiative of the Simplicity Forum and a project of the Center for Religion, Ethics and Social Policy at Cornell University.

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